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Beware the Lobbyists in Lab Coats!

by

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The death of President Reagan has become the pretext for certain biotech companies and their political allies to launch another raid on the public treasury.

Now they are promising that if only they can get their hands on tax dollars to carry on experiments in which human embryos are killed, they will deliver a cure for Alzheimer's disease. The mass media are weighing in on their side with heavy-handed propaganda stories labeling this a controversy between science and morality. As they tell it, President Bush is being held captive by a gang of politically potent religious zealots who won't let him give the green light to scientific advances that will produce cures for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, cancer, diabetes or whatever disease your loved ones may suffer from. But I don't need to tell you that; if you watch network television, Peter, Dan and Tom have already told you all about it.

If the public knew a few things that have been, well, let's call it underreported (I would never suggest that professional journalists would engage in censorship, deception or spiking of relevant information.), they might be inclined to frame the issue rather differently.

First, contrary to the claims of certain political and journalistic cheerleaders for the biotech firms, there are currently no restrictions – absolutely none – on experiments that entail the destruction of human embryos. There ought to be, but that is another matter entirely.

Experiments involving the killing of human embryos to extract their stem cells have been going on vigorously for nearly a decade, ever since stem cells were first discovered. Patients with various disorders have been treated experimentally with embryonic stem cells. Huge amounts of money have been raised from investors in the companies which conduct this research

and promise miraculous breakthroughs just around the corner. So the issue is not that there are "restrictions" on embryonic stem cell research, but simply that it has not been subsidized by the federal government.

Second, the federal government has been pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into stem cell research that does not entail the destruction of human beings – and with astounding results. It turns out that there are numerous sources for stem cells, including umbilical cord blood, bone marrow, skin and even fat tissue. The extraction of these stem cells does not entail the killing of a human being and so presents no ethical dilemma at all.

Therapies based on these "adult" stem cells have produced results that would have to be regarded as nothing short of miraculous. The blind have regained sight, the lame are able to walk, damaged hearts have been made whole. And a man whose Parkinson's was so severe just three years ago that he was confined to a wheelchair recently had to excuse himself from appearing at a Congressional hearing on stem cell therapy because he was on safari in Africa! These are breathtaking achievements, and there are more to come. The development of regenerative medicine based on stem cell therapies is probably the greatest medical advance of all time.

But, third, none of those advances is the result of treatment with embryonic stem cells. There is not one person on earth – no, not even a mouse, the favored laboratory subject of the experimenters – who has been cured of any disease or whose condition has improved even a little bit as a result of treatments with stem cells taken from embryos. On the contrary, a disturbingly large proportion of the persons (and mice) treated with embryonic stem cells have developed cancer.

But surely it is just a matter of time before embryonic stem cells are found to produce some beneficial effect? At this stage, no reputable scientist would say "never," because the field of stem cell biology is too new to close the door of possibility on anything. But I, as a scientific layman, am willing to predict that no benefit to any patient will ever come from treatment with embryonic stem cells, because the very characteristic that makes these stem cells attractive in laboratories is what makes them lethal in patients.

That characteristic is, fourth, that embryonic stem cells replicate far more rapidly and have considerably greater plasticity than adult stem cells. In the laboratory, that is a real advantage, because an experiment can be conducted much more rapidly (and cheaply) if you can produce a cell line in three days instead of 30 days. But excessively rapid cell replication in a patient is the very definition of cancer, and a high level of plasticity may be a serious disadvantage when what is needed is one very specific type of tissue.

Fifth, and finally, the realization that embryonic stem cell research is a therapeutic dead end is beginning to sink in among investors. The biotech companies that were flush a few years ago are looking ahead to hard times unless they can get a new infusion of cash. And what better source than the public, who will not be represented at stockholder meetings to demand accountability for the expenditure of their hard-earned dollars?

The key to this scam is creating a political constituency that will demand tax funding of embryonic stem cell research as a good thing in itself. The biotech hustlers have built that constituency by cynically manipulating the emotions of those millions of Americans who suffer or whose loved ones suffer from chronic or degenerative disorders. It is true that stem cell research may very well offer cures for many of these diseases, and perhaps soon. But the research that promises hope is already being funded by the government, and the additional funding that is demanded is for research that will go nowhere. (The pretense that killing embryos in laboratories will someday lead to a cure for Alzheimer's – the claim prompted by the nation's mourning over President Reagan – is especially meretricious because the consensus among scientists is that no stem cell therapy, not even adult stem cell therapy, is likely to produce a cure for Alzheimer's because of the peculiar nature of that disease.)

The other part of the coalition manipulated by the biotech gangsters is the abortion lobby. It was easy to recruit them because they are driven by an ideological need to cover up the great untruth on which their entire movement rests – the claim that, before birth, a human being is not really human. This ideological need is what drove the abortion lobby, in opposing the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, to line up on the side of the violent thugs who beat up and kill women. And now they are helping out a bunch of get-rich-quick schemers who profit by preying upon the sentiments of those who watch their loved ones suffer.

Nice company the abortion lobby keeps!
